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ABSTRACT

The University of Arizona's Precollege Program for academically talented secondary school students, which enrolls qualified students in selected university summer courses, is described. The majority of the students are between their junior and senior year in high school and have a grade point average of at least 3.25 on a 4.0 scale. In addition to influencing students' college choices, the program allows students to explore career options, to interact socially, and to become acquainted with the resources of the university. Support services are offered to students via a system of general academic program advising, plus specific field guidance by academic professionals. On campus living with a selected group of undergraduate counselors helps students understand aspects of the university community and its cultural and social activities. Students learn to use the university network to their advantage, and they learn the value of peer support. Precollege program participants are good information sources for administrators interested in postsecondary options. It is suggested that future research address such topics as differentiation between gifted and nongifted students and cross-cultural and cross-ethnic student comparisons. (Author/SW)

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DEVELOPING PRECOLLEGE PROGRAMS FOR HIGH ABILITY SECONDARY STUDENTS AT THE UNIVERSITY LEVEL

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ABSTRACT

The opportunity to experience college prior to full-time attendance has a positive influence on students' postsecondary institutional choices. The University of Arizona's Precollege Program for academically talented secondary students enrolls qualified students in selected university summer courses. It also provides the opportunity for students to explore various career options, to interact socially, and to be introduced to the vast resources of the university.

Support services are offered to students via a system of general academic program advising, plus specific field guidance by academic professionals. On campus living with a selected group of undergraduate counselors helps students understand aspects of the university community and its cultural and social activities. Students, therefore, learn to use the university network to their advantage and they learn, through interaction within their own group, the value of peer support.

Precollege Program participants provide rich sources of data for administrators interested in postsecondary options. Future research might concern such topics as differentiation between gifted and non-gifted students and cross-cultural and cross-ethnic student comparisons.

DEVELOPING PRECOLLEGE PROGRAMS FOR HIGH ABILITY SECONDARY STUDENTS AT THE UNIVERSITY LEVEL

ORGANIZATION-RATIONALE

The recruitment of high ability high school students is a present concern among college and university administrators. Research indicates that the opportunity to explore the college experience prior to matriculation is desired by high ability students; that it has a strong, positive influence in student's subsequent choice of an institution of higher education. Research also indicates that the experience of such a program contributes toward higher education retention.

For the past four summers, a Precollege Program for highly motivated, academically able secondary students has been in existence at the University of Arizona, Tucson, Arizona. These students, who go through a special admission process, are selected by grade point average of at least 3.25 on a scale from 0.0 (F) to 4.0 (A) and two strong recommendations from principals, counselors, or teachers. The majority of the students are between their junior and senior year in high school.

The program gives an early look at college life by allowing students to enroll in specially selected courses (mainly in

humanities and Fine Arts) in the company of undergraduates. They earn college credit for their efforts which are placed "in escrow" until the time they attend college full time. Courses include: anthropology, astronomy, math, languages (French, Italian, Russian, German, Spanish, and Latin), philosophy, geology, computer science, political science, history, English, and Fine Arts (dance, drama, art, and speech). Each student may take one or two courses -- a maximum of six credits in a field of his/her interest.

To list some of the various organizational aspects will give an idea of what is involved in the Precollege Program arrangements:

- preparing printed matter to announce your intentions to secondary schools
- distributing materials to school counselors, admistrators
- visiting honors classes, junior classes, assemblies, counselor/administrator meetings for explanation of Precollege Program opportunity
- addressing parent groups
- telephoning all schools too distant for visits
- arranging course selections in academic departments
- understanding of legal implications
- creating, with admissions office, a special admissions procedure
- arranging for "programming" (extra important activities for students)
- making the program known throughout the University

- hiring undergraduate personnel to live with students and serve as mentors during the program, being constantly attentive to the progress and needs of the students

- follow-up studies for program evaluation

The program included also (perhaps even more important than the academics) all varieties of social life, plus career exploration, study skill seminars, library skill training, individual professor "living room dialogues", visits to law and medical school, astronomy sites. The camaraderie developed among the students could not be underestimated; they often were their own support group thereby sharing ideas and learnings.

The program has been met with enthusiasm by students and university faculty. It has achieved some of its major goals:

1. To give special students who are looking for a challenge, side-by-side with undergraduates an exciting educational opportunity in a college atmosphere.

2. To introduce young people to the enormous resources of the University.

3. To allow this population to think of this University as a viable choice in their college plans.

4. To identify able students from diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds in the area.

5. To give the University a chance for closer communication with secondary schools and support their desires to broaden and supplement educational experiences for their students.

STUDENT SERVICE ARRANGEMENTS

The precollege experience facilitates student development and maturity through a variety of support service functions throughout the summer months. The first of these is the provision for academic advising. Initially students receive a general university orientation as well as registration instructions from the program advisor. As students become settled into their summer coursework, they are given opportunities to develop mentor relationships with specific professors in their designated field of interest. This combination of general programmatic advising by the program advisor and specific field guidance by an academic professional has proven to be quite successful. Students have rated positively both the quality and quantity of their academic advising experiences while in the program.

The second vitally important provision is the opportunity to live on campus. Students are able to experience college life within the residential setting which yields a strong sense of identification with both the institution and their own peers. Residential living allows the student to experience the university as a community, providing easy access to the wide range of cultural opportunities and resources that lie outside of the traditional classroom. It also provides a powerful catalyst for

social development. Students become acquainted with a wide variety of people of all ages, cultural identity, and intellectual capability.

Although the opportunity for broad exposure to a variety of life and learning styles has in part been responsible for the success of this program, it has been equally important to provide these students with an opportunity to identify themselves as a special group. Although they possess a great deal of intellectual maturity, they are for the most part, chronologically two or more years younger than the traditional college-aged population. Special consideration was always given with this in mind when any activity was planned. Therefore, it was important to provide special programming and activities for this group alone, to the exclusion of the larger student population.

As a means of developing cohesion within this group, special counselors were assigned to the group in the residential setting. The counselors were typically lower division university students who were interested in helping other students make the transition to university life. The counselors were responsible for keeping track of their specific group as well as assistance in any academic or personal matters as needed. The precollege student then always had a variety of support systems to aid him/her through the university experience: academic advisors, intellectual mentors, student advisors, and informal peer support.

The result of these efforts is that the institution becomes personalized. Early on these students learn to use the university network of support systems and professionals. The university is viewed not as an impersonal institution, but a rich gathering of minds and personal relationships. These students are carefully guided through the complex operating structure while at the same time encouraged to realize the wealth of potential they represent both individually and collectively.

RESEARCH POSSIBILITIES

Students enrolled in precollege programs provide a source of data concerning various aspects of high ability students. This information may be available through surveys, personality tests, ethnographic approaches and in-depth interviews with students. It is often necessary to employ a variety of paradigms when conducting research because clear-cut answers to research questions are often elusive. Indeed, these questions seldom fit into the usual quantitative methods.

Previous research with high ability students enrolled at the University of Arizona has focused on students' choice of institutions of higher education (Douglas, Powers, and Choroszy, 1983; Douglas and Powers, under review; Powers and Douglas, under review; Douglas 1984) Attributions for success and failure (Douglas and Powers, 1982; Powers and Douglas, 1983) and test validity questions (Powers, Douglas, and Choroszy, 1983; Powers, Douglas, and Choroszy, in press; Choroszy, Powers, and Douglas, in press.

Future research in high ability programs might concern such topics as the differentiation between gifted of the school type and gifted of the non-school type. With two groups and several predictor variables it could be determined if a significant discriminant function could discriminate between the school

gifted and the non-school gifted. Factor analysis could be used to examine the underlying structure of responses to various instruments. These factors for school gifted and non-school gifted students could be compared by means of coeffients of congruence. As minority enrollment in precollege programs increases, the possibility of cross-cultural and cross-ethnic comparisons become feasible.

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